

## News focus

# Battle lines deepen to save bluefin tuna

A ban on the international trade in this lucrative fish is now being considered as current conservation measures have still seen stocks collapse. **Nigel Williams** reports.

Germany has joined Britain, France and the Netherlands in backing Monaco's proposal to seek a listing for bluefin tuna by the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (Cites), which would ban all trade in the fish. The measure is seen by Monaco as the only option now open to preserve the species many biologists believe could be wiped out from the Mediterranean by 2012 at current levels of fishing.

Germany's environment minister, Sigmar Gabriel, announced the decision late last month. "Only a trade ban will save this particularly at-risk species from extinction," Gabriel said. "Bluefin tuna therefore needs to be listed on the Cites convention — indeed, this is a long overdue step."

He added: "Up to now, attempts under the EU's Common Fisheries Policy for protection of bluefin tuna have been ineffective and without success."

Britain's fisheries minister, Huw Irranca-Davies, said the UK would seek support in Washington and other capitals for the Cites ban on trade. France, which has a bigger bluefin tuna fishing fleet than any other country, has backed the proposed Cites ban. Speaking on the need to protect global fish stocks, the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy said: "Ours is the last generation with the ability to take action before it is too late."

Conservation groups were delighted with this news, which would bypass management by the fisheries body in charge of bluefin tuna, the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (Iccat), which has been widely condemned for its failure to protect the fish.

But almost everyone acknowledges that the biggest problem will be Japan. Bluefin tuna is highly prized there for sushi and sashimi and a single fish can fetch \$100,000 in Tokyo. And, motivated by such prospects, organised crime in Italy is believed to be involved in the

Mediterranean fishery, which is believed to land 60,000 tonnes of bluefin a year, almost treble the legal catch and four times the amount recommended by scientists.

Monaco has been privately canvassing support for a Cites ban during recent weeks. "Now we've had sight of the proposals, I can confirm that the UK will support a Cites listing of bluefin tuna," Irranca-Davies said. "We do think this is not a substitute for Iccat and the work it does, but we are pleased to give that proposal for



**End of the line:** Current conservation measures have failed to protect the bluefin tuna, which may disappear from the Mediterranean by 2012 unless drastic action is taken. (Photo: Greenpeace/Marco Care.)

Cites listing our strong support. We hope others will come on board as well.”

Providing it attracts sufficient support, Monaco will table its resolution by 17 October for the Cites meeting in Doha, Qatar, in March. A ban — requiring a two-thirds majority — would take effect 90 days later, ending the annual summer bluefin hunt. “Banning international trade in the imperilled Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin tuna is the only possible course of action — this is our last chance to save this over-exploited species,” said Heike Vesper, fisheries officer at WWF Germany.

“It’s fantastic the UK is taking such a strong stance on bluefin by backing the listing on Cites,” says William MacKenzie, Greenpeace’s ocean campaigner. “Bluefin tuna are the blue whales of our time, and have been relentlessly over-exploited for far too long.”

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“This iconic species has long disappeared from UK waters and we need to ensure the same does not happen in the Mediterranean,” says Sally Bailey, marine programme manager at WWF.

Many consumers, in Western countries at least, are also becoming increasingly concerned about the unsustainable exploitation of fish stocks. While many supermarkets are now committed to selling fish that has been endorsed as sustainable by an outside agency such as the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), many restaurants have been slower to react.

The Japanese fish restaurant chain Nobu has come under attack for continuing to serve bluefin tuna. Britain’s fisheries minister has joined a number of British activists, writers, actors and artists in boycotting the restaurant. Nobu has now added symbols advising diners in London that the fish is ‘environmentally challenged’ and asking diners to request an alternative. But it has so far resisted pressure to stop selling the fish.

Raymond Blanc, owner of the Michelin-starred restaurant Le Manoir aux Quat’Saisons, near Oxford, announced last month that it would stop serving endangered species of fish and only offer seafood endorsed by the MSC. It is the first restaurant of this rank to announce such a policy. Blanc called for other restaurateurs to follow his lead, adding: “By supporting MSC, I am ensuring that, as a chef, I am helping to ensure that fish stocks will be replenished for generations to come.”

And one recent success story is that of the California black cod fishery, which has undergone a radical environmental overhaul. Much of California’s fishing industry had for decades been unprofitable or only marginally profitable, so banks had been unwilling to lend money to fishermen and the handling and processing companies. In 2005, the Environment Defense Fund (EDF) worked with the Nature Conservancy

on a fishing vessel and permit buyout that protected over three million acres of valuable ocean habitat, and a group of fishermen in Morro Bay, central California, switched from trawling to using more selective and environmentally friendly gear types, including traps and hook-and-line. And earlier this year, the EDF launched the California Fisheries Fund (CFF), a \$5 million loan program to further build the state’s fishing communities and develop eco-friendly fishing. One of the results of all these efforts is that fishing quotas for black cod have nearly quadrupled for this year — rising to three million pounds in the fishing regions surrounding Morro Bay — due to the abundance and health of the stock.

Many conservationists in Europe will be hoping that a trade ban in bluefin tuna will provide the jolt to save the species and, if so, a radical rethink on how it might be managed sustainably in the future.

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## New grids on the block

Meeting both carbon emission targets and energy demands may be feasible with DC cables connecting power-thirsty cities to sun-drenched deserts.

**Michael Gross** reports.

What if we could harvest the solar energy beaming down on the Earth’s deserts and transport it to the cities in not so sunny latitudes, where most of the energy demand is located? The idea is an old one, and various solutions have been proposed, including the production and transport of solar hydrogen.

Now, however, a major cooperation between a dozen companies from the energy, technology, and finance sectors has given a boost to a very different kind of approach. Under the concept developed by the international foundation Desertec ([www.desertec.org](http://www.desertec.org)), concentrating solar-thermal power plants (CSP plants) are to produce electricity by bundling sunlight with large mirrors and using it to generate steam, which would drive steam turbines and generators. Electricity generated in the Sahara, for instance, could be transported to Europe with a new,

high voltage direct current (HVDC) grid.

Both these key technologies are relatively simple and already in use on a smaller scale. The foundation has given preference to CSP plants over photovoltaics, because they are cheaper to build and can store heat reserves to provide power at night or on cloudy days. As an extra benefit, surplus energy could also be used to provide drinking water by desalination. HVDC grids were chosen because the losses can be limited to 3 per cent per 1,000 km, making transport from North Africa to Europe a realistic perspective.

In July, 12 companies, including major energy providers, solar technology specialists, and banks, signed a memorandum of understanding at Munich, in order to start turning the Desertec concept into reality and to set up the Desertec Industrial Initiative (DII). The first goal of the initiative is to draw up concrete business plans and finance initiatives for pilot projects.

The Desertec foundation expects that a lot of general awareness-raising and political change is still needed to get the project going. It states that in many places “the commercial playing field is tilted against renewable resources like CSP and wind